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State's top story: Jeffords decides to retire

MONTPELIER — Through the first four months of this year, the re-election of U.S. Sen. Jim Jeffords next year seemed all but assured.

He had \$2 million in the bank, a campaign staff hard at work and the political equivalent of a trifecta: Democratic U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy, independent U.S. Rep. Bernard Sanders and Republican Gov. James Douglas had all voiced their support of the senator's re-election.

But then on April 20, four years after he shuffled control of the U.S. Senate with his "coup of one," Jeffords announced that he had decided it was time to close out a career in the House and Senate that spanned 30 years.

"After much thought and consultation with my family and staff, I have decided to close this chapter of my service to Vermont and not seek re-election in 2006," he said.

Jeffords' decision has been voted the top Vermont story of the year in The Associated Press' annual balloting of news organizations. It narrowly edged out the toll of the Iraqi war on the state, which had been the top story of 2004.

Here, in order, are the top 10 stories of the year as ranked by Vermont's newspaper editors and radio and television broadcasters in the AP balloting:

1. Jeffords won't run

Jeffords, 71, cited his own health problems and those of his wife as reasons he reversed his plans to seek re-election. The surprise announcement immediately triggered a political scramble that now ensures Vermonters will have open seats in 2006 for the U.S. Senate and U.S. House.

Jeffords has held the Senate seat since 1989, but he captured the

nation's attention in 2001 when his decision to abandon the GOP placed the Democrats in control of the U.S. Senate and made him a national hero among Democrats and a villain among Republicans.

2. Vermont pays price

Six Vermonters were killed in Iraq this year, bringing the death toll of Vermonters over the course of the conflict to 19. A 20th Vermonter died of natural causes in Kuwait while training to go to Iraq. The year saw continued deployments of Vermont National Guard troops as well as the return of 600 troops at the year's end. Some 500 remain deployed.

3. Death penalty returns

In July, a federal jury said Donald Fell should be put to death for kidnapping and killing Tressa King in the state's first capital punishment trial in nearly a half-century. Jurors reached their decision after roughly 10 hours of deliberations over two days. Vermont has no death penalty; Fell was convicted under federal law.

4. Health care reform

Gov. James Douglas vetoed a health care reform package promoted by Democrats and denounced the legislative session, saying lawmakers, especially House members, have "moved so far to the left of the mainstream."

5. Dean leads the party

Less than a year after the collapse of his presidential campaign, former Gov. Howard Dean won election as chairman of the national Democrats. He focused his efforts on rebuilding the party at the grassroots and condemning the Bush administration.

6. Ex-hospital CEO pleads

In January, William Boettcher pleaded guilty to a charge that he misled state regulators about the true cost of the hospital's major expansion. In April he was sentenced to two years in jail.

7. Carbon monoxide tragedy

A Sunday in January turned tragic when carbon monoxide from a faulty boiler spread through an apartment building in Burlington. Jeffrey Rodliff of St. Johnsbury was killed, two others were critically injured and several others were injured seriously.

8. GE buys IDX

Medical software company IDX will become part of General Electric's health care division under a sale announced this year and which will be completed in January. IDX was established in 1969 and now employs 2,400 people around the world, including 850 at its South Burlington headquarters.

9. Vt. Yankee power boost

The future of Vermont's sole nuclear power plant was debated on several fronts this year as the plant seeks to extend its license, increase its power and store more waste at the reactor site. The plant's owners won a major Statehouse victory when lawmakers gave Entergy Nuclear the authority to ask for Public Service Board approval to store spent nuclear waste in dry casks at the plant.

10. UVM upsets Syracuse

It was true March Madness: Tom Brennan's 264th and final victory at Vermont came in overtime; the 60-57 defeat of Big East champion Syracuse in the first round of the NCAA tournament showed the world

the band of brothers whose rule of Patrick Gymnasium had been a delight to Vermonters.